

Headwaters Tourism Association presents annual progress report to council

By Angela Gismondi

A lot of progress has been made since King Township joined the Headwaters Tourism Association a year ago.

Michele Harris, executive director of the Hills of Headwaters Tourism Association and Vicki Sword, project manager for Headwater Horse Country, came before council on Monday with a presentation and the annual progress report on Headwaters Horse Country partnership initiatives.

"This partnership is a testament to what can happen when communities work together," said Harris. "Economic development in rural communities is challenging but working together helps. This is a unique opportunity that is not available anywhere else."

Last April, King Township committed to a three-year partnership agreement with the Hills of Headwaters Tourism Association's (HHTA) equine initiative, Headwaters Horse Country, which includes them in the Headwaters Horse Country (HHC) equine marketing initiative and earns them a spot on the Headwaters Equine Leadership Group (HELG).

HELG was formed to promote the Headwaters area, which includes Caledon, Dufferin, Erin, and most recently King Township as the premier equine region in Ontario. This initiative, Sword explained, will use a regional collaborative approach that draws upon the resources and assets of the regional municipalities, business and economic development associations, sector and citizen groups to support, grow and advocate for the equine industry. It will enhance the capacity of the entire Headwaters region and its municipalities to support economic development strategies to create a prosperous regional economy.

In terms of funding, the program has received a three-year Trillium Grant, government and municipal support and partnerships and event sponsorship through local industry.

Through the partnership King hopes to achieve several goals which include promoting the Headwaters region and King Township as a destination and a centre of equine excellence, helping to facilitate related economic development opportunities that support the growth and sustainability of the equine sector in the region, identifying opportunities to enhance the equine industry capacity in the region and working with partners to capitalize on the opportunities and recognizing the opportunities presented by the 2015 Pan Am Games which will be hosted in the Headwaters region.

In the first year of the partnership several of these initiatives are well on their way, Sword reported. A "four legged approach" economic impact assessment framework has been developed which features four areas of focus that will establish a good understanding of the economic impact of the equine industry in the region and in respective communities. These four areas are: 2013 baseline indicators, database/asset mapping, profiling horse facilities in various sectors and benchmarking to other equine destinations/regions.

Branding and marketing materials have been developed to promote Horse Country, a microsite has been developed and will be launched in May, a monthly newsletter is produced and received by over 900 people and the group will also be tackling social media this year.

The program has a number of representatives from King Township including Jamie Smyth, King's economic development officer, Ward 3 Councillor Linda Pabst and Jennifer Coxworthy, who recently stepped down.

Two of King's equestrian facilities, Gimcrack Equestrian Center and Waterstone Estate & Farms, were featured along with nine other facilities on the 2013 Headwaters Horse Country Stable Tour, which was held this past October. Ideally more King facilities will be engaged and get involved in the 7th annual event taking place on Oct. 4 and 5 this year.

Headwaters has also developed a Pan Am strategy, Harris noted. The Games will be held in Toronto in 2015, with the equestrian events being held at Caledon Equestrian Park and at the Will O'Wind eventing facility in the Town of Mono. While the events will be held in Caledon, Harris said they anticipate there will be spillover into neighbouring municipalities such as King.

The strategy involves positioning the Headwaters Horse Country brand with regional signage and tourism strategies to leverage the legacy of the games including holding contests to provide a signature local food and drink and an art exhibit and trail linkages and potential partnership with Toronto's Pan Am Path.

In order to develop additional Pan Am legacy opportunities, Harris explained, Headwaters as Horse Country by is exploring partnerships with Equine Canada and the Ontario Equestrian Federation to develop and position the legacy of the Pan Am Games to support a national and international equestrian export and economic development strategy.

Staff recommended that Council continue to support the partnership between King Township and the Hills of Headwaters Tourism Association until March 31 2016 pending satisfactory progress. The cost to continue this partnership is a \$15,000 annual fee funded through the Economic Development budget. Council approved the recommendations.